

ARTICLE APPEARED

IN THE 1-B

WASHINGTON TIMES
25 June 1985

TELEVISION / Sue Mullin

Another
view of
Vietnam

It's taken almost two years of red tape and preparation, but tomorrow at 8 p.m. on most PBS stations, including WETA-26, WHMM-32 and MPT, the rebuttal to PBS' controversial series "Vietnam: A Television History" will be broadcast.

Acting kiddish, PBS first will present an introduction to the critique, then the Accuracy in Media-produced "Vietnam — The Real Story" rebuttal, and then — demanding the last word again —

an analysis of the rebuttal and more debate.

In October, when PBS announced it would air the one-hour AIM documentary responding to what the group calls "errors" in the 13-part series produced by PBS station WGBH in Boston, PBS spokeswoman Suzanne Weil said that PBS stands behind the original series and feels it is so accurate that it can withstand the criticism from AIM. The documentary series first aired in 1983 and was re-broadcast last summer.

So much for PBS being able to withstand criticism. It has wrapped another hour around AIM's hour and is calling the whole shebang a special "Inside Story," which was the name of PBS' old media watchdog series with Hodding Carter.

It is important for viewers tomorrow night to remember that the original series began production in 1977 at a total cost of \$4.5 million, about \$1.4 million of which came from your tax dollars. AIM was begrudgingly given a tiny fraction of that kind of money and precious little time for its rebuttal. The AIM film was funded by AIM contributors and a \$30,000 "chairman's grant" from William Bennett, former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

You've heard the old saw about going after an ant with an elephant gun. Well, this is the reverse. The disparity in bucks — and the time, manpower and production "qualities" they buy — does put the AIM film in a disadvantageous light compared to the frequently glossy, professionally edited original series. The AIM documentary depends much of the time on the less catchy "talking heads" format. Except for a small amount of film footage — for example, scenes of the carnage in Cambodia, of a parade in New York City to support

American soldiers, and of Jane Fonda beaming in Hanoi as if she were on the Johnny Carson show — the film uses mostly unemotional, scholarly statements to drive home its points.

Except for host-narrator Charlton Heston's stentorian tones, even the sound of the AIM film is dull as dishwater. The film's speakers, who include Douglas Pike of the University of California, Berkeley; Dolf Droze, former member of the National Security Council (1967-1973); Nguyen Ngoc Bich, spokesman for the Vietnamese community in the Washington area; Elbridge Durbrow, former U.S. ambassador to Vietnam (1957-1961); Rep. John McCain, R-Ariz., and a former prisoner of war; Dan Cragg of Army Magazine and the National Vietnam Veterans Review; William Jayne, of the Vietnam Veterans' Leadership Program; and Sen. Steven D. Symms, R-Idaho, are no match for 13 hours of mostly action-oriented film footage.

Even more lopsided is the elitist response to the idea of the AIM film on the part of the ostensibly "unbiased" and "impartial" journalistic community.

"Because of the time I'm on the air, I saw only a fragment of the original," ABC Nightline's Ted Koppel told TV critics a couple of weeks ago in Los Angeles. "I do say, on principle I don't like the idea [of the opportunity to rebut]... because the burden is on the producer to do as responsible a job the first time around."

While "Vietnam: The Real Story" begins at a slow, pedantic pace as it focuses first on the project proposal by the producers of the original series, AIM has put most of its hour to good informational use.

Scoring the original series for lack of historical perspective, Reed Irvine, AIM chairman, notes that viewers had to wait until the last installment of the series to learn about the consequences of America's cease-fires and ultimate withdrawal from Vietnam. Mr.

Irvine points out that one-third of the Cambodian population died under the 3½-year rule of Pol Pot. He also says that the repression and misery in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos resulted in the exodus of at least 2 million people from their homelands.

"Unfortunately, the PBS series doesn't show the connection between these horrendous events and their cause," continues Mr. Irvine, "namely the imposition of communist rule over all of Indochina."

Other errors and omissions cited in the AIM response include:

- A "glossing over" of historical facts about Ho Chi Minh, including a reference to the communist leader as a Vietnamese "patriot for a quarter of a century" before he came to power in North Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh was active as a communist in France and later went to the Soviet Union and China, Mr. Droze says. Mr. Droze adds that the North Vietnamese leader was not considered part of the nationalist movement in Vietnam but rather as the betrayer of Phan Boi Chau, "the George Washington of the national movement."

- A painting of the South Vietnamese as villains and of the National Liberation Front (NLF) as a nationalist, populist idea. In 11 places in the original series, contends Dr. Bruce Loeb of Idaho State University, "the series says we and the South Vietnamese reneged on an election."

Mr. Loeb explains that while no elections were promised at the

Continued

Geneva Accords, we would have approved of elections monitored for fairness. "Every myth needs a hero and a villain," says Mr. Loeb. "They [the producers of the original series] wanted to legitimize Ho Chi Minh's aggression against South Vietnam."

Douglas Pike says in the AIM film that the treatment of the South Vietnamese in the original series amounted to a "racist," "non-people," "contemptuous" view of U.S. allies.

- Unfortunate juxtaposition of

the treatment of Viet Cong and American prisoners. While the original series featured brief interviews with North Vietnamese who claimed to have been tortured (or to have witnessed torture) as CIA advisers looked on, Rep. McCain says Americans got a bad rap.

- Portrayal of American soldiers. U.S. soldiers were unfairly portrayed in the original series as "drug addicts, racial bigots . . . and as a man who murdered his officers and NCOs [non-commissioned officers] almost at will," says Mr. Cragg. The series gave the "distinct impression," adds Kenneth Moorefield of the Vietnam Veterans' Leadership Program, that "our soldiers were inferior to the North Vietnamese soldiers."

Compounding that error, says Mr. Jayne, was Episode 13 in which Vietnam vets were portrayed as "haunted," as "losers" and as "victims." Mr. Jayne counters that

"many vets are now assuming leadership roles in this society."

- Failure to emphasize the disastrous implications of the Case-Church Amendment on the war in Vietnam. The legislation "left our soldiers without air power" and was "a tragic story in our history," says Sen. Symms.

- Unbalanced interviewing. While talking to some boat people, Episode 13 dwelled disproportionately on interviews with Vietnamese communists. "Over a million Vietnamese have left their land despite our great longing for being where our friends and relatives and families are," says Mr. Bich.

- The role played by the news media. Referring to the North Vietnamese Tet offensive, Mr. Irvine says it was a clear case in which "victory was turned into defeat by our own news media."

As with the original Vietnam series, tomorrow night's program will not end the debate on Vietnam. But at last we are moving out of an emotion-charged arena to calm, measured analysis. AIM — and PBS for all its reluctance — is to be congratulated, not castigated.